DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 048 257 TE 002 225

AUTHOR Arnold, Carroll C.
TITLE Speech as Action.
INSTITUTION New York State English Council, Oswego.
PUB DATE Oct 70
NOTE 8p.
JOURNAL CIT English Record; v21 n1 p36-43 Oct 1970

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Attitudes, *Communication (Thought Transfer), Elementary Education, English Education, Interpersonal Relationship, *Language Arts, Listening, Reading, Secondary Education, Speech, *Speech Education, *Verbal Communication, Writing

ABSTRACT

Instead of emphasizing forms and types, teachers of communication should emphasize the kinds of actions that verbal communications are--both for those who make them and for those who receive them. Because, in verbal communication, language becomes a vehicle by which we exert "force" on another, language arts studies ought to begin with the study of the attitudes and impulses which result in communication. Moreover, both teachers and students should be educated to feel that the rewards of communication outweigh its risks. Some movement in this direction has already been accomplished: newer teaching materials emphasize human problems and resources as well as the processes and tasks that children need to understand before mastering the art of influential communication. However, an overemphasis on formal and ritualistic aspects of communication still exists (e.g., in communication theory and generative grammar). To overcome this, speech and English teachers must put the human actions of all communications at the centers of their curriculums. (DD)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

English Record, Vol. 21, No. 1, October 1970.

ED 048257

# SPEECH AS ACTION

Carroll C. Arnold

Nine years ago at a conference of the New York State Speech Association, I tried to peer into the future of speech and English education, in collaboration with the late Carl Freudenreich, then Supervisor of English in the New York State Education Department.[1] In this essay I undertake to inspect the recent past and look once more to the future.

I think it fitting in 1969 to pick up where Mr. Freudenreich and I left off in 1960 because I judge that English and speech curricula are still not fully focused on the real facts of communicative life. Almost a decade ago, my friend and I spoke of the necessity for all teachers of communication to de-emphasize forms and types and to emphasize, instead, the kinds of *actions* that all verbal communications are—for those who make them and for those who receive them. Freudenreich and I contended in 1960 that the more teachers observed the latter emphasis, the more they would ameliorate what were called in the cliché of even that day "breakdowns in communication."

CS 001 325

On how such emphasis could best be achieved Carl Freudenreich and I found ourselves in mild disagreement; I revive the point of our disagreement confident that my late friend would applaud its further discussion. Like many others a decade ago, and now, Mr. Freudenreich argued that the study of language—as signalling system—ought to be the starting point for constructive, "language-arts" education in the schools. I argued that to fasten on language as the *basic* phenomenon in human communication was to ignore what most educated human beings can discover by introspection: that language is simply a tool we use in order to accomplish *actions* toward other people. What else, except the passion that breeds expletives, accounts for our resort to oral or written language—or to smoke signals, Morse code, or other symbolic signalling systems? It seems clear to me that verbal communication is predominantly behavior in which language becomes one of the *vehicles* by which we try to exert "force" on someone else. And if this is so, the starting point for a constructive program intended to produce people who com-

*Carroll C. Arnold, currently Professor of Speech at the Pennsylvania State University, is co-author of five college textbooks, past editor of* Speech Monographs, *and associate editor of* Philosophy and Rhetoric. *His most recent publication entitled "Oral Rhetoric, Rhetoric, and Literature"* (Philosophy *and* Rhetoric, *I*) *explores the concept of "speech as action" in detail.*



Copyright New York State English Council 1970.

municate with some skill and understanding cannot begin with attention to language, the vehicle. Such a program ought to begin by giving attention to the attitudes and impulses that impel people to *resort to* language, or fist pounding, or screaming, or other vehicular modes of influencing. On such premises it would not be the form or code or style of communication that would be pointed to as fundamental; those instructed would be given to understand that at the root of all communication lie generative attitudes, intentions, and aspirations which must be understood before the uses of language that are associated with them can be examined in enlightened fashion.

I do not wish to imply that study of language for its own sake is unimportant. Men ought to understand their codes. But I would assert that the question, "What is his *language* like?" is not a *first* question about the quality of anyone's spoken or written communication. The *first* questions are: "What is the *act* he seeks to commit?" and "Why is he *acting* in this way?" I propose that English and speech curricula in the schools need to put the first questions first, as they still have not entirely done.

In 1960, there was little evidence in educational materials in New York State that these first questions about *acts* of attempted communication were thought relevant to so-called "language arts" programs. I cite a single example. A little booklet titled *Everday Writing* was published in 1959 for use throughout the state. This passage was the core of its introductory statement to elementary school teachers:

> This leaflet deals with various aspects of everyday writing that must be done by elementary school children. It includes the writing of friendly and business letters, informal notes, invitations, reports, diaries, note taking, and the writing of club minutes and news stories. It summarizes the technical knowledge and language usage that are required.

A casual reader might say, "This draws attention directly to the social *acts* for which we use written language." But that reader would be wrong. The entire booklet was about the "proper" forms of "acceptable" letters, club minutes, and so on. That the intentions, experiences, and actions of writing letters and reading them are what cause men to structure letters differently from club minutes got not even a dependent clause in this basic book for teachers. Similarly the New York State *Syllabus* in English in 1960 implied that speech education in the schools would be achieved if students learned the accepted *forms* of using a telephone, asked grammatically appropriate questions in interviews, and in like fashion learned the rules of other social rituals that use speech instead of writing. (Let me note in pass-

ing that this section of the syllabus was prepared by *speech* teachers, not by teachers of writing and literature.)

It would be easy to multiply evidence from the syllabi of New York State and almost all other states that the teaching of writing and speaking was predominantly teaching of "good form" a decade ago. There are signs of change; nonetheless, this essay is written to urge that the changes be speeded up.

One of the newer speech testbooks [2] for senior high schools subordinates its discussions of language forms and of types of speeches to such considerations as the roles of speech in forming American society, the environmental conditions which allow or prevent spoken communication from occurring effectively, the problems that must be solved in composing influential speech once reasons to speak have come into being. There is little in the book about interviewing as a *form* of discourse or about after-dinner speaking *per se*, or about formal "rules" of panel discussion. The emphasis is on the *human problems* that beg to be solved through speech and the creative tasks that are confronted when anyone undertakes to solve such problems by resort to personalized, verbal communication. A textbook with this sort of emphasis constitutes a good sign, I think.

Another good sign is the emphasis in the New York State Education Department's *Experimental Materials* on reading, published in 1964. These documents direct attention to the *processes* and the *tasks* that children must understand before they can truly master communication that influences or seeks to influence. It is urged that the real reason children need to understand words—achieve vocabularies—is that words are the instrumentalities of speaking and reading. It is only because the sounds people make must seem conventional to be meaningful that pronunciation is important, according to this source. The reason a child needs to search for meanings in the gross structures and the logical patterns that recur in language is simply that the meaning of any written message transcends the meanings of words viewed in series only. Communicative *strategy* is the thing to which this kind of pedagogical orientation invites initial attention; interpreting strategies comes next, and using like strategies comes finally as the sensible way of surviving in a linguistic world. At last, though not emphatically, *man* regains center stage in the communicative world.

But all is not won—in New York State or elsewhere. *English Language Arts, Experimental Material: Composition Section* published in 1965 by the New York State Education Department, has as its very first lesson: "The child [K-3] learns to express a complete thought orally." Under the heading, "activities," the

following appears: "It is important that the teacher speak to the children in complete sentences." I think it fair to interrupt the quotation with an incomplete sentence. "No matter what she says?" The passage proceeds: "Read simple sentences to the children. Have the children tell the *who* and *what* of each sentence. Encourage children to speak in complete sentences whenever preferable." I call special attention to the confessional qualifier. In "whenever preferable" lodges the admission that everything preceding was unreal. How is it that one discovers when a complete sentence is preferable instead of inappropriate? Can the litany of formal "propriety" tell? Is it not by deciding what social *act* is to be performed by uttering that appropriateness of grammatical action is determined? In the passage just cited, *form* is assigned ultimate value despite a dependent admission that verbal forms are in the last analysis authorized only by the qualities and conditions of human relationship and interaction.

I launch no vendetta. I have illustrated from materials published by the New York State Education Department only because I assume my readers are familiar with these documents. To even matters, I call attention to the fine disregard of what speaking is, as *action,* that is reflected in a recent college textbook on speech: "Any speech that has as its primary purpose the presentation of a learning experience for listeners is classifiable as informative or instructional." [3] Once more, as in the earlier quotations I have presented, human communication is being treated as a *thing* rather than as an adaptive *action* engaged in by a communicator in hopes of influencing the private experience of a listener or a reader.

It seems to me undeniable that, though wholesome signs appear, speech and English pedagogies still emphasize *forms* of print, script, and utterance and de-emphasize the human *problems* and human *resources* which at once account for and measure communicative acts.

If the facts are even approximately as I have suggested, they are not of merely theoretical interest. Is it not possible that some of the frustrations of students, some of the so-called generation gap, and some of the gap between teachers and students is traceable to unrealistic emphasis on formal and ritualistic aspects of communication at the expense of attention to problems of human relationship that bring verbal communications into existence?

I recently sat with three language-arts supervisors from a medium sized city in Pennsylvania. The supervisor of work in the elementary grades said that somewhere between grades 3 and 5, "Our students seem to make up their minds that they

shouldn't talk in class because it's too risky—you could be wrong and that hurts your grades." The high-school supervisor said, "Whatever the reason, many of the best students are convinced by the time they reach us that the only safe ways to behave are to *say* as little as possible and, instead, to listen and read in order to find out what it is safe to 'send' in writing." The supervisor from the junior high school agreed that his colleagues were describing conditions accurately. This bleak testimony can be secured from school system after school system—and not alone from Pennsylvania.

Recognition of speaking (and writing and reading and listening) as humanly significant action is not difficult to achieve. Through co-operative efforts of The Pennsylvania State University, the Pennsylvania Speech Association, the Pennsylvania State Department of Education, and the federal government, successful but relatively simple attacks are being made on communicative problems in classrooms, and fundamentally similar programs in English are being developed. In my state it is being demonstrated that any teacher of any subject can, if she wants to, change students' attitudes toward the action of speaking. It is being proved that teachers can create conditions under which guidance toward effective and efficient oral communication can come to be sought after. Step One is to educate the teachers—all of them—to the fact that for any of us to *say* anything to others is to choose to act in a way that is in some degree riskful to one's self because it involves acting in a way that exposes one to the possibility of being or being thought to be "wrong." Teachers are taught this elemental fact by being forced, themselves, to communicate orally with each other, with college professors, and with pupils while acknowledging that *they* have human purposes which will stand or fall depending upon the strategic wisdom with which they manage their personal powers. In this way teachers are made to *feel* the tensions that riskful communication creates in all humans—including their own students. Step Two is to educate the teachers to the fact that it is only when we think the rewards of talk outweigh the risks that any of us is psychologically prepared to seek in practical fashion the communicative strategies that are available for our acknowledged purpose. Step Three is to show teachers the wide array of opportunities and techniques they have for making oral communication natural, necessary, but unthreatening in their classrooms. The whole retraining program hinges on getting teachers to look upon speech as a human action that has to be *proved* safe, useful, and open to practical, rewarding refinement. When teachers see these things, their teaching strategies and their students' attitudes toward oral communication change.

Using communicative strategies becomes a matter of good sense rather than a ritualistic battle to conform to requirements imposed without reference to the needs communicators feel within them.

The same general approach has been adopted in the teaching of writing. A reportedly outstanding English program in Chicago employs a comparable approach to communication in the elementary grades of a ghetto school.[4] Pupils "share and tell," but they are kept at the "sharing" until their peers say they "understand." Then, and only then, the sharers get the "privilege" of writing. Writing becomes the "record" of successful, oral creation, reflecting the human importance both writing and speaking have in social experience. Consequently the strategies which generate communicative forms gain practical, hence genuine importance and justify in their turn, the conventional forms of verbal usage.

If such programs are in any degree unusual, it is only because communication is treated as an event that makes sense only to the extent that it is practically motivated *action* toward someone else who has become important and real. In these programs one does not *begin* with attention to oral or written language, or to communicative form *per se*. One begins with human problems and human aspirations. They make it necessary to find out how language, behavior, and form serve practical purposes. Resolution of human need justifies a search for and conformity to whatever it may be that listeners and readers peculiarly demand of speakers and writers.

Through whatever window I peer into the future of education in speech and English, the same necessities seem to present themselves: necessities to subordinate form, rule, and ritual and to elevate human problems in learners' consideration as the sole excuses for communicative acts. I am even led to the heresy of suggesting that the words "language arts" be declared obscene. They imply that language is a *thing*. They imply that to make acceptable, moving communications is to behave artificially and in even an eccentric manner. This is not total untruth, but it is conceptualization heavily freighted with untruth. School children and college students know from observation that language and linguistic forms are tools before they become "art." To talk of "art" before one talks of "needs" is for uncorrupted children and laymen psychological nonsense. It is only the connoisseurs of artifacts who prize the finished forms above the living experience that generated them.

As a final point I wish to emphasize that this essay is no unrestrained call for pedagogical change without careful assess-

ment of what goals the teaching of the nature and arts of human communication should serve. If I have reasoned at all well, at least two of the most widely discussed approaches to teaching speech and writing deserve diffident reception.

Pedagogy in oral communication quite properly recognizes the emergence of what is commonly called "communication theory." As usually treated, this "theory" is an explanation of human communication by analogy with electrical circuitry. Analogically, communication is discussed as a process of encoding, transmitting, decoding, interpreting, and responding. Following a strand of linguistic theorizing which uses a quite different analogy, much pedagogy in English treats "generative grammar" as a descriptive explanation of compositional creativity.

English and speech curricula ought to be influenced by these fertile interpretations of the ways we communicate with each other, but we ought also to notice that there is nothing in either of these ways of conceptualizing that prevents one from confining *people* and their communicative *business* to the closet while explainers meditate on progressive diminution of human choice in grammatical generation or the regenerative circuitousness of communicative cycles. Without insistence that it is needful persons who generate language according to convention and that they do so to *act upon others* who are equally but differently needful, English curricula can become as sterile and "irrelevant" under the influence of generative "rules" as under the rules of "correctness." And unless every "encoder" is seen as a needful person who has dared to *risk* himself in personalized association with particular, needful others, speech curricula can remain as sterile as a routinized set of drills in "correct" telephonic conversation, "beautiful" oral reading, or "polished" interviewing or public speaking.

Neither generative grammar nor communication theory inherently invokes recognition that human communication is action taken toward other human beings. Yet to understand that process entails learning to know the selves that act, commit, risk, and respond when communication occurs.

It seems to me that if communicative gaps are to be closed, speech and English teachers must put the human actions that all communications are at the centers of their curricula. Language-centered, form-centered, activity-centered, circuitry-centered curricula have not closed the communicative gaps of an open society, nor are they likely to. I regret that it is almost as heretical in 1969 as in 1960 to propose that the basic test of any English or speech curriculum, or unit of instruction, or instructor ought to be a test that asks whether students' attitudes were made

more, rather than less, favorable toward settling human problems by verbal means. Even though it might seem disturbing to think of one's salary rising and falling in proportion to the rise and fall of one's students' enthusiasm for constructive communicative processes, I seriously suggest that high valuation of communication as a means of relieving and resolving human problems is truly the acid test of whether speaking and writing, listening and reading are being humanistically taught. One might even go so far as to suggest that some of today's incivility and frustration with "the system" could be diminished if fruitful *use* of the modes of communication were stressed above the modes themselves. The world's problems would not disappear if English and speech teachers so resolved and so taught, but we who profess the communicative processes that are centrally verbal would at least make sense to our students. And we might reveal that verbal communication is more interesting as a creative, constructive tool than as a weapon. That would be no small thing.

**FOOTNOTES**

This essay is an adaptation of an address of the same title delivered at the joint convention of NYSEC and NYSSA, Buffalo, April 26, 1969. Mr. Arnold is Professor of Speech at The Pennsylvania State University and was formerly Professor of Speech and Drama, Cornell University.

[1]The addresses referred to were delivered March 11, 1960 before the annual convention of the New York State Speech Association, Elmira, and were published in Speech Association Reports, V(May 1960), "Special Feature," 1-17.

[2]R. R. Allen, Sharol Anderson, Jere Hough, Speech in American Society (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1968).

[3]Glen E. Mills, Message Preparation (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1966), p. 10.

[4]As reported to the NCTE-SAA Joint Committee on Rhetoric and the Preparation of Elementary School Teachers, Chicago, Illinois, by Rita Hansen, USOE English Curriculum Center, Northwestern University, January 8, 1966. See also mimeographed report. Wallace W. Douglas, "A Teacher's Experience with Composition" (Evanston: Curriculum Center in English, Northwestern University, 1965).

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
New York State English Council
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."